THE SONS OF KAI

Henry Beston

THE SONS OF KAI

The Story the Indian Told

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Hah-Tse-Yalti, the talking God.

THE SONS OF KAI

The Story the Indian Told

By

Henry Beston

New York
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
1927

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Set up and electrotyped.
Published November, 1926.

Printed in the United States of America by
J. J. LITTLE AND IVES COMPANY, NEW YORK

To

MISS MARY CABOT WHEELWRIGHT

Because those who love the Southwest and its peoples owe to her courage, her discernment, and her venturing spirit more than they can repay.

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HAH-TSE-YALTI, THE TALKING GOD . *Frontispiece*

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THE SONS OF KAI

The Story the Indian Told

THE SONS OF KAI

THE country of the Navahos lies south and west of the Rocky Mountains on a great tableland lifted up into the sky. It is a country of canyons and deserts, mountains and wild pasture lands arched over by the bluest sky in all the world. The sun there seems bigger than our northern sun, and he treads the sky each day like a proud Indian god in a feather headdress of gold and fire.

When a Navaho falls ill, or has recovered from an illness, his friends and the friends of his friends meet together by night to dance the sacred fire dance. In the open land by some lonely settlement in the ancient hills, they kindle great fires

under the starry sky, and dance the sacred dance round and about the flames. The old men sing, the drums resound, and the tread of the dancers shakes the earth till the fires sink and die in the glow of the mountain dawn.

The song which the old men sing at the dance is very beautiful and very old. It is called the Song of Healing. This is the story the Navahos tell about the song.

ONCE upon a time, say the Navahos, an Indian people lived in a cliff dwelling in the south wall of the Canyon de Chelly.* The huge, arched-over hollow in which their town was built was more than halfway up the side of the reddish-pink canyon wall, and to get to it, the people had to climb ladders and follow narrow paths cut in the stone. Looking from the canyon up to the cliff, one could see the little square houses nestling under the huge arch, a watch tower, and a granary. At one end of the arch, a ribbon of water, gliding down the cliff,

* Pronounced "chay."

marked the overflow of a fine spring which never failed.

The people of the cliff village lived by farming. A river flowed through the canyon, and along its banks were peach orchards, and meadows, and fields of melons, squashes, beans and tasselled corn. All day long, as they went back and forth between their fields and the town, the Indians could be seen climbing up and down the cliff.

At night, the ladders were pulled up so that no enemy or climbing animal could reach the town. Then the great arch filled with stars, little cooking fires began to twinkle in front of the houses, and the barking of coyotes was to be heard, now near, now ever so faint and far away.

The silversmith of the town was named Pesh-li-kai, which, in the Navaho tongue, means the Silver Man. He had a little

forge, a bellows of goat skin, and an anvil which he held between his knees. Now Pesh-li-kai, so the Navahos say, had a daughter, and she was quite the handsomest of all the Indian girls. So gracefully and prettily did she move that the people called her Kai, which is The Willow.

One spring morning, Kai went down the ladders to weed in the young corn. Suddenly she heard a pleasant voice call her by name.

The maiden dropped her weeding stick, rose to her feet, and looked about. No one was near, and no one answered her when she called.

A few days later the girl again went down to weed in the corn. A little breeze was blowing thin clouds down the canyon sky, and brought to the girl's ears the faint voices of other villagers work-

ing along the valley. Suddenly Kai heard, from near at hand, the pleasant voice again calling her by name.

Once more, the daughter of Pesh-li-kai looked about, and once more could not discover who had called.

On a third morning, however, when the same unknown voice had spoken a third time, there was a rustling of leaves in bushes by the river, and a young Indian man stepped out of them, and walked towards Kai. He was tall, his features were grave and handsome, and he was clothed in a splendid garment of soft, snow-white buckskin beautifully decorated with beadwork figures in the old Indian way. Upon his head was an Indian bonnet of eagle plumes.

This tall young man was Hah-Tse-Yalti or the Talking God. He had seen the daughter of Pesh-li-kai and fallen in

The twin sons of Kai.

love with her. So that morning, in the spring sunlight of the canyon, the Talking God asked the girl to marry him, and this she did.

Of this marriage, twin boys were born whose strange adventures you shall hear.

The daughter of Pesh-li-kai brought up her sons in the cliff dwelling. Their father, Hah-Tse-Yalti, had returned to the country of the gods.

Because the twins were fatherless, or seemingly so, all the villagers were kind to them. The war chief of the village, who was a nephew of Pesh-li-kai, taught them the use of the bow and arrow; the peace chief of the tribe taught them the Indian lore of animals. Their mother Kai taught them the ancient prayer to the gods and to the new day which the Navahos still say when the sun comes over the mountains.

They hunted, they fished in the river, they swam and thrashed about in the pools.

Every summer buffalo hunters left the village to go buffalo hunting on the plains, and before they went, the men and boys of the village danced the buffalo dance.

In the year that the boys were ten years old, the dance took place at night. As the houses of the town were built against the back wall and the sides of the open hollow, there was a fine open space in front under the overhanging arch, and there the Indians built a great fire. The pine branches crackled and burnt fiercely, the yellow flames leaped at the roof, darkening the soot-smudge already there, and a fragrant smoke full of red sparks curled out the arch and poured up into the sky.

Then drums began to sound, stately drums, and the older men of the village came out beating the drums and singing the deep-voiced buffalo song.

The buffalos and the buffalo calves. . . .

Then came the younger men, the dancers, climbing one by one from their council-chamber underground. The dancers wore moccasins of hide and turquoise beadwork trimmed with the black and white of skunk fur, their lean, strong legs were washed over with reddish brown paint, a broad band of white cloth encircled them from the waist to just above the knees, and their bare upper bodies and arms were painted like their legs. They wore turquoise and silver necklaces, and round their foreheads, bands of brilliant cloth.

Ten of the dancers were supposed to be buffaloes. You could not see their human heads at all, for they were hidden in real buffalo heads with hollow wooden frames. These dancers looked just like buffaloes with painted human bodies. Two little buffalo calves followed be-

hind the grown-up dancers. When the older buffaloes pretended to be real buffaloes, and looked about and at the ground as if they were looking for grass, the two buffalo calves did the same thing.

The buffalo calves were the twin sons of the Talking God and Kai. They were proud beyond words to be in the dance. Their thick, straight, black hair had just the gloss of a blackbird's wing in the sun, their eyes were a deep black-brown, and they were strongly made and of pleasant countenance, even as the Talking God, their father.

They swam and thrashed about in the pools.

A day or two after the dance, the mother of the twins went down into the canyon to look for certain roots used in making a dye. As she was scanning the ground, she saw a ground owl sitting at the mouth of its burrow playing cat's cradle with a thin buckskin thong. The Navahos say that the spider taught the owl this game, and that the owl taught it to men.

"Daughter of Pesh-li-kai," said the ground owl, "where are your sons?"

"In the village," replied the mother of the twins.

For a moment or two after this, the owl said nothing whatever, but continued with his "cat's cradle" game. Then suddenly he fixed his round yellow eyes on

Kai, and said slowly, "If I were you, I would hide them there a while. The god whom we call the Mischief Maker is in the land, and if he finds the twins, he may do them harm. Keep them at home, Daughter of Pesh-li-kai."

At these words the frightened mother dropped the little bundle of dye roots she had already gathered, and ran as fast as she could back to the village. When she reached her house, her heart almost stopped beating, for the boys were not there. She did find them, however, at their grandfather's. They were seated on the ground near the tiny forge, watching Pesh-li-kai melting silver in a cup.

Calling the twins to her, their mother told them of the ground owl's warning, and forbade them to leave the village even for a moment. She then gave them a buckskin cord to play cat's cradle with,

and went down the ladders to continue her search for the roots. As these were small and not very plentiful, she had to search the ground for them slowly and carefully.

About the middle of the afternoon, the mother became aware of a sound of the sighing of wind, a sound that did not die away, but grew louder and louder and louder till all the little pinyon pines in the canyon, rustling and moaning together, made a sound like the sea. Kai knew instantly that a cloud-burst was at hand. She had hardly gathered her roots together before the sky grew pitchy dark.

Great whirling billows of dust now swept up the black canyon; whirls of dust swept off the canyon rim into the tumult of the upper air; the whole world seemed to dissolve in a great, trembling, roaring sound of wind and rushing rain. With

a peal of thunder that echoed and re-echoed from the canyon walls, the cloud-burst reached the valley.

Roaring rain of the southwest country, rain of the giant drops, rain that in the twinkling of an eye turns little rivers to deep streams. The thunder bird rode the wild dark, the wind, and the sheets of rain, the arrows of lightning fell from the bows of the thunder spirits.

Seeing the cloud-burst coming, the Indians working in the fields dropped their sticks and hoes and ran as fast as they could for the ladders. Kai ran pell-mell with the rest. The instant she reached the town she looked about for her sons.

They were nowhere to be found.

Presently a neighbor remembered seeing them going down the ladders carrying their bows and arrows. Another neighbor was sure that they had gone to

"Where are your sons?"

hunt wild turkeys in the waste land back of the canyon rim.

The twins had forgotten their mother's warning, and were out somewhere in the storm.

The water which had fallen on the uplands now began to tumble over the canyon rim in wild cascades, and as the storm increased, the arch through which the village looked out upon the world was curtained over by a giant waterfall. Now and then, at one edge of the arch, there were flashes of lightning through the tumbling waters.

In the shelter of its rocky hollow, the town stood snug and dry. But it was very dark, and the darkness was full of the hiss and roaring of the fall.

The Indians built a fire and gathered about the flames.

All night long, the daughter of Pesh-

li-kai fed the great fire with fresh branches. All night long, sitting alone, she watched the play of the flames on the plunging foam of the fall, and listened to the thunder mingle its wild sound with the tumult of the waters.

When the morning came, and the great fall had thinned to half a dozen little ones, the mother was still there waiting by the embers of the fire.

The boys had not returned.

The Mischievous God had found them, and shut them up in a cave.

There were flashes of lightning through the tumbling waters.

For three days the twins remained in the cave. It was darker than the darkest night within, and fearing to lose each other, the boys clung together as they felt their way about. On the second day, one of the boys fell heavily over a stone, and rose from the ground crippled and lame.

On the morning of the third day, they heard a heavy sound. The stones with which the Mischievous God had blocked

the mouth of the cave had fallen down. A ray of light appeared, and the boys went towards the sparkling gleam. When they had emerged into the sunshine, one of the twins said to his brother,

"Where is the light of which you spoke? I cannot see it." And he felt about as if he were still in the cave.

Then the other twin looked into his brother's eyes, and saw that during the three days in the cave his brother had become blind.

Leading his blind brother by the hand, the lame boy led off into the empty country. Far, far away, rising blue and beautiful through blue air, one of the four sacred mountains of the Indian people lifted its snow-capped head. The twins were in a strange desert country many days journey from their canyon home.

After wandering thirstily about for a

The twins learned the use of bow and arrow.

whole day, they came to a little river, and upon its bank they rested for the night.

The next morning, when the rosy desert dawn began to blossom in the sky, and the long dawn shadows of the cactuses and the desert shrubs lay gray and cool upon the lifeless ground, the twins stood up, and said the old Indian prayer to the sun and the new-born day. Then down the stream they hobbled forlorn towards reddish desert mountains at the far edge of earth and sky.

The river, as it approached the mountains, grew larger, and presently plunged into a canyon much narrower and deeper than the canyon in which the boys were born. Now following along a little bank, now climbing over great boulders in the river bed, the boys struggled on into the gorge. Suddenly the river turned a sharp

corner, and following it, the twins found themselves in a wild and magnificent valley whose slopes were green with trees.

From the eastern wall of this valley, a huge cliff with a broad flat top thrust itself forth like the prow of a giant ship built to sail through the stars. Fires were burning on its summit, and columns of pale smoke wavered and scurried away in the wind on the heights. At the foot of the cliff, the river churned in a great foaming pool, and this pool was full of huge logs washed down the hillsides by cloud-bursts and the floods of spring.

This rock was Tse-intyel, "The Broad Rock of the Gods," and the pool was "The Place of the Whirling Logs." The Gods dwelt there.

Just before the twilight deepened and died, the lame boy managed to kindle a tiny fire. The blind twin sat beside it,

"Here are three gifts to help you win them."

listening to the deep thunder of the churning pool. Every now and then some log would strike some other log a dull, booming blow.

Suddenly the blind lad heard the faintest sound of distant footsteps, and caught his lame twin by the arm. Looking up startled, the lame boy saw a tall man coming towards them, his face grave and sorrowful.

The visitor was Hah-Tse-Yalti, the Talking God. An eagle had told him of the plight of his twin sons. So that night the Talking God consoled his unhappy children, and told them what they must do to be healed.

"You must visit the four sacred mountains," said the Talking God. "First you must go to the Mountain of the North, then to the Mountain of the East, then to the Mountain of the South, and lastly

to the Mountain of the West. The tribes of the Sacred Mountains will receive you in friendship, and at the Mountain of the West, the Chief of the People will teach you the Healing Song."

So the lame boy and the blind boy went north and east and south and west to the four sacred mountains and learned the healing song. Their father Hah-Tse-Yalti watched over them, and every night while they slept, placed a bowl of food at their side.

When the twins had learned the healing song, they made their way again to the Broad Rock and sang the song before the Gods.

"But where are your gifts?" said the Gods. "You must bring us the three sacred stones before you can be healed."

In the dark of the night Hah-Tse-Yal-

ti came with the bowl of food, and woke his sons.

"The three sacred stones," said the God, "are Turquoise, Silver, and Shell. The Hopi people guard them. Here are three gifts to help you win them. In this buckskin pouch of white beads is the Frost, the enemy of the young corn.

"In this buckskin pouch of green beads is the Cutworm, the devourer.

"In this buckskin pouch of blue beads is the Hail that strikes the grown corn to the ground."

Down the river paths, and across the desert and the mountains, the boys went to work for the Hopis who guarded the Sacred Stones.

The boys found the Hopi people living in the desert on the same mesas they occupy today. The Hopis, so the Navahos say, mocked at the brothers.

"Ho! Ho! Ho!" they said, "so you have come to work for us, have you? What can you do, you lame boy, and what can you do, blind boy? And what wage do you ask of us?"

"At the end of the spring, our wage shall be the Sacred Silver Stone," said the boys. "At the midsummer, our wage shall be the Sacred Turquoise Stone, and at the time of the harvest, you shall pay us the last sacred stone of gleaming purple shell. Will you make this bargain with us, people of the Hopi?"

"Yes," said the Hopi people mock-

ingly, never dreaming that the twins meant what they said. And they gave the twins an almost roofless room in an old part of their pueblo, and told them to go and work in the fields.

All the early spring, the lame boy and the blind boy worked hard helping the Hopis plant their corn. The corn of the Pueblo Indians is not straw-yellow like ours, but of all colors; it is orange, it is orange-gold, it is garnet-red, it is purple like the grape.

When the spring was at end, and the young corn was well started in the fields below the mesa, the twins asked for the Sacred Silver Stone.

"We have kept you alive, and that is enough," said the Hopis angrily. "Do you suppose we should ever part with the Sacred Silver Stone?"

The twins said little, but remembered

the frost magic which their father had given them in the first buckskin bag. In the middle of the night, when the stars were shining on the desert, and everybody in the pueblo was asleep, the twins opened the bag. The cold that crept out of the pouch nipped and numbed their fingers, and through the broken roof, they could see the stars veiling over.

For three days, the twins left the pouch open, for three days it was cold in the Hopi country, and for three nights there were frosts which damaged the growing corn. The Hopis presently held a council to see what could be done.

After the Hopis had talked and talked, and everybody in the pueblo had been asked for his advice, an old man chanced to say:

"We have not yet asked the lame boy and the blind boy. Suppose we ask them

to the council, too. They may be able to give us some advice."

At this many laughed, but the twins were sent for, after all. The lame lad hobbled to the council ground with his blind brother clinging to his sleeve.

Then the lame lad leaned upon his brother and told the Hopis that he and his twin could work magic to stop the frost and save the corn, but that for doing this, the Hopis must give them the promised sacred stone.

Unwilling to lose their corn and live half starved during the next winter, the Hopis promised faithfully to give the boys the sacred stone. So the boys closed the first buckskin bag, and the corn began to grow again.

By the midsummer, the tasseled corn was growing splendidly. The twins, who had worked hard, then asked for the second sacred stone. But the Hopis were unwilling to pay the promised wage.

That night the twins let the cutworm out of the second bag, and before the morning he had worked a world of mischief in the corn. Once again the Hopis held a council, and once again they called in the brothers.

"Yes," said the boys. "We have magic strong enough to clear the cutworm from the corn, but you must promise us the second sacred stone."

So the Hopis promised faithfully to give the brothers the Stone of Turquoise, and the boys then closed the bag from which the cutworm had crept. The instant they did so the cutworm vanished from the corn.

At harvest time, the tall stalks of corn were more beautiful than ever. The brothers now asked for the three sacred stones—the Stone of Silver, the Stone of Turquoise and the Stone of Purple Shell.

"Be off!" said the Hopis. "You shall not have the stones." And they threatened the boys that they would send them away from the mesa. Returning to their room, the boys opened the last of the buckskin bags.

The sky grew dark; the wind began to howl over the mesa; the corn stalks shuddered, and tossed their ripening leaves.

Suddenly huge hail stones began to tumble down.

The hearts of the Hopis grew cold with fear, for they knew that the hail would beat down the corn, and that the ears would rot rather than ripen.

"Stop the hail with your magic!" they cried to the boys. But the boys paid no heed till the Hopis put the sacred stones into their hands.

Then the hail stopped, the storm cleared away as swiftly as it had gathered, and the brothers left the mesa carrying the stones for which the Gods had asked. On the rocky stairs leading from the pueblo to the ground, the magic hail stones were shining and melting in the sun.

Tse-intyel, the home of the Gods, was far away beyond the deserts and the mountains, but the brothers made the long journey safely. Hah-Tse-Yalti, their father, though unseen by them, protected them and brought them food.

After spending a night by the Pool of the Whirling Logs, the boys climbed the Broad Rock of the Gods. They began their climb long before the dawn, and arrived at the top just as the sun appeared at the far rim of the earth.

From the flat top of Tse-intyel, the Gods could see all the wide Indian world,—the deserts, the waste lands, the river pastures, the dark canyons with the sun silvering their western rim, the lonely little hills, the snowy mountains, and the

great plains where the buffalo herds moved like slow cloud shadows over the immense and tawny land.

Then Hah-Tse-Yalti took his sons by the hand, and led them before the Gods. The chief of the Gods was he whom the Navahos call "The God-Who-Is-Stronger-Than-Fear." The brothers then gave the Gods the three sacred stones, and sang the Healing Song.

When they had finished, the God-Who-Is-Stronger-Than-Fear touched the blind boy upon the eyes, and the lame boy upon the knee. And the blind boy saw again, and the lame boy limped no more.

So the brothers gave thanks to the Gods, and rejoiced at their healing, and Hah-Tse-Yalti rejoiced with his sons. When the time came for the boys to go, Hah-Tse-Yalti led them to the eastern edge of Tse-intyel, showed them their

Homeward to the canyon of their childhood.

canyon home, and told them of the trail of the Gods which led to it.

Homeward to the canyon of their childhood went the boys, homeward to the cliff dwelling and to Kai their mother.

And the Navahos say that the twins became great heroes, and taught the Indian peoples the Healing Song they sing to this very day.

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